

Women's idealised bodies have changed dramatically over time – but are standards becoming more unattainable?

September 13 2016, by Viren Swami



Credit: Twitter: @everyoneisetra

Many Londoners were appalled by adverts last year featuring a woman in a bikini asking others if they were "beach body ready". For many, these type of adverts are emblematic of the sexist cult of thinness that is so pervasive in contemporary Western culture. But surely, there have been

all sorts of body ideals throughout history – are things really any different today?

If we go back far enough in time and look at sculptures created by ancestral humans populations, we [get a very different picture](#) of what the [ideal body](#) for women may have looked like. Our ancestors inhabited environments characterised by food shortages and individuals who were able to quickly increase their body mass may have had an advantage in terms of health and even fertility. This is supported by the archaeological record of Venus figurines – such as the "Venus of Willendorf" from the late Stone Age – which suggests that between ten and 100,000 years ago, the ideal female figure was robust and round.

This was the case up until the 19th century. Artists like Titian, Rembrandt, and [Rubens](#) all portrayed the ideal woman as voluptuous and round. Venus, the goddess of beauty, was typically portrayed with a round face and a pear-shaped body.

Frailty and subservience

In the late 19th century, this started to change. An idealised image of a woman with a slight shape and a small, corseted waist, sloped shoulders, tapered fingers and delicate feet started to emerge in North America and Western Europe. Known as the "steel engraving lady", [this ideal](#) came to be associated not only with frailty, weakness and subservience, but also with high social status and moral values.



Venus von Willendorf – from the Stone Age. Credit: MatthiasKabel/wikimedia, CC BY-SA

By the end of the [19th century](#), another ideal began to emerge - the "Gibson Girl". This image combined features from the steel engraving lady and the previous voluptuous woman to create an ideal that was slender in the waist and legs, but still curvy with wide hips and with corseting.

In the 1920s, the exchange of corsets for new undergarments that bound the breasts created a flat-chested, boy-like appearance. During this era, the beauty ideal shifted to an almost exclusive focus on slenderness,

requiring the use of [starvation diets and "rolling machines"](#). It was also in the 1920s that the proliferation of mass media helped to create a standardisation of beauty ideals in North America and Western Europe. Movies and magazines, as well as Hollywood stars, presented a homogenised vision of beauty and it's also during this period that we see the first [adverts for weight loss](#).

By the 1940s, slender legs became the focus of beauty ideals -- emphasised with hemmed stockings and high-heeled shoes. Bust size also grew in [idealised images](#) and would soon become the dominant feature of female ideal beauty. Interestingly, [researchers](#) during this period began to document the first instances of negative body image, with women desiring smaller body sizes and larger breasts.

By the time the supermodel Twiggy debuted in the United States in 1966, the trend toward increasingly slender bodies had taken hold. [Playboy centrefolds and Miss America pageant winners](#) all showed a decrease in body weight and hip size, and an increase in waist size, bust size and height between the 1960s and 1980s. By the mid-1990s, this female beauty ideal had become synonymous with the thin ideal, which has remained at [clinically underweight levels](#).

It is certainly true that, in the early 1980s, a more muscular ideal of female beauty emerged – exemplified by broad shoulders. In fact, shoulder pads became the defining fashion statement of the era, known as "power dressing". Nevertheless, the focus remained on a thin, slender body shape. Likewise, the re-emergence of particular types of exercise regimens – such as high intensity interval training and weightlifting – has resulted in a more muscular ideal for women more recently, but typically the ideal remains thin.



Man having a crush on a Gibson girl. Credit: Charles Dana Gibson, CC BY-SA

Doomed to failure?

Another significant change that began in the 1990s was the [denigration of overweight women](#). In popular TV, for example, overweight women were stereotypically portrayed as unintelligent, greedy, and unable to form romantic attachments. There has also been increasing focus on the health risks associated with being overweight across all media. The effect of the combination of the idealisation of thinness and the denigration of overweight has been the homogenisation of a beauty ideal that is unachievable for the majority of women.

Contemporary Western women are exposed to this thin ideal in almost every form of media – from magazines to TV shows and popular films. So it's no surprise to learn that so many of women in the West are dissatisfied with their bodies. In one [large survey](#) of almost 10,000 women in the United States, for example, my colleagues and I found that almost 85% of respondents were dissatisfied with their current body size and wanted to be thinner.

Even more concerning is evidence that the thin ideal is now a [global phenomenon](#), with women in most urban, developed settings – including places like India and China – reporting an idealisation of thinness and a desire to be thinner. For body image scholars, this is worrying because of the overwhelming evidence that body dissatisfaction is a risk factor for disordered eating, consideration of cosmetic surgery, and poorer psychological well-being in general.

All this seems to indicate that today's body standards are indeed becoming increasingly unattainable. However, in the 21st century, encouraging signs that the thin ideal is being challenged have begun to emerge. In some parts of the developing world, the thin ideal is being questioned and re-negotiated in line with local norms. In [Belize](#) in Central America, for example, young women have re-interpreted the thin ideal – allowing it to be more curvy, which is consistent with local norms and body shapes.

Similarly, when the "beach body" adverts first began appearing in London, many were vandalised by women inspired by the resurgence of feminism. In a globalised world, connecting [body](#)-positive movements across borders is easier too. When the adverts reached the subway in New York, for example, women there followed those in London to deface the adverts. This is just one small example, but it points to greater awareness of the detrimental effects of the cult of thinness and points to a future in which women are no longer judged solely on their

appearance, but on their real competencies.

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